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ABSTRACT

Development of oral foreign language proficiency in high school and college instruction is complemented by well-designed writing exercises integrating all skills and providing contact with various language forms. A series of short, text-adaptable, proficiency-based writing activities reinforcing aural, oral, and reading skills throughout the basic course levels can be adopted easily. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Provisional Proficiency Guidelines can help organize writing activities. Development of writing must follow a sequence like that of speaking, including time to practice the language in a variety of ways. Most first-year activities can be based on dialogue, beginning with manipulation of lexical items and leading to more creative language use and varied activities. In the second year, activities related to solidification of basic accuracy in grammar and spelling are useful and paragraph structure can be approached. During the third year and beyond, high school and college courses will differ in orientation, but in general students will be learning to express and defend opinions, produce cohesive narration and personal correspondence, and control less-structured grammar. Most writing activities can be adapted to most difficulty levels. Grading can be difficult, but immediate feedback is essential. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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Developing Functional Proficiency in Writing

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The value of a well-integrated writing program cannot be underestimated in today's proficiency-oriented second-language classroom. One may well lament the upper level students' inability to express themselves in writing, only to realize that little has been done in the lower level courses to systematically develop the writing skill. A student who has only done written grammar drills and some copying and dictation for four semesters cannot be expected to suddenly write creatively as a result of that practice. Skill development, by definition, indicates a progression of activities, which in the case of writing indicates a movement from the more mechanical to the more creative. Given the difficulty many students have writing in their native language, one can begin to appreciate the difficulties inherent in the development of writing proficiency in the second language. As foreign language teachers we must not presume that there will be a transfer of skill in writing from the native to the second language, since, in fact, there may be nothing to transfer. Instead, a carefully structured sequence of instruction and practice in writing should be an integral component of the second-language classroom at all levels.

Writing, especially at the lower levels, is basically a reinforcing activity essential to the development of fully functional ability in the language. The increased push for oral proficiency can be complemented by well-integrated writing exercises. These exercises, by graphically representing what the students are hearing and saying, integrate all skills and provide contact with a variety of forms of the language.

One of the major barriers any beginning language student faces is speaking in the classroom situation. Well-planned written activities provide extra time for preparation, correction, and assimilation of language prior to in-class oral activities. Thus prepared, the student has more confidence and performs at a higher level with less stress.

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The occasional composition, assigned without preparation or clear directions, will most often result in frustration for both the student and the teacher. A series of short, text-adaptable, proficiency-based writing activities that reinforce aural, oral, and reading skills throughout the basic course levels can help alleviate the difficulties involved when time and materials may pose problems.

The most timely basis for the organization of sample writing activities in a systematic program is the *ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines* (1982). The terms Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, and Superior used to designate proficiency levels should not be seen as being equivalent to a certain number of semesters or years of second-language instruction, since functional proficiency does not equate with the amount of grammar covered. While a student obviously needs grammar to communicate beyond the most basic single-word utterances, the simple introduction of grammar *per se* does not guarantee development of this ability. The proficiency levels indicate ability to function communicatively within a limited context, and with a certain degree of accuracy. Typical writing activities at each level are as follows: Novice—ability to use fixed, memorized expressions to supply lists, complete simple forms, etc.; Intermediate—ability to meet survival needs when commenting on personal and familiar topics in brief compositions and letters using longer, more complex sentences; Advanced—ability to meet routine social needs, describe and narrate in the past, present, and future, and take notes, etc.; and Superior—ability to present and defend points of view, hypothesize and discuss abstract topics in memos, research papers, and social and business correspondence. While the above lising is very general, Sally Sieloff Magnan (1985) provides a detailed discussion of the *Guidelines*, possible revisions, and the necessity of developing a proficiency test in writing equivalent to the ACTFL/ETS Oral Proficiency Interview currently in use.

The development of writing must follow a sequence very similar to speaking in that the student must have time to practice using the language in a variety of ways. Depending on the texts available, many writing activities can be generated at each level of second-language instruction.

The First Year

During the first year a majority of the activities can be based on the dialogue. These activities will begin with the manipulation of a lexical item such as the use of *gustar* in a modified drill situation, which in turn will lead to more creative use of the language; in this case a short composition on personal likes and dislikes. Original dialogues, role-playing skits, summaries, and compositions based on previously memorized and practiced materials

help bridge the gap between the "drill" and "creative" language use. The topics for these activities can come directly from the text dialogues and related real-life situations. While the activities will be used sequentially at first, it is possible to repeat certain ones over the course of the semester. The basic exercise may appear the same, but the context and complexity of the language involved will increase in an almost geometric manner as the student moves from the manipulation of structure and form toward the creative use of language for meaningful communication.

Writing in the first year is essentially a reinforcing activity related to memorized materials and high-frequency vocabulary appearing in dialogues and short reading selections. Since most beginning language texts present dialogues at regular intervals, it is quite possible to develop a series of writing activities using the dialogues as the core. A suggested sequence of activities follows.

1. Copying the dialogue to focus attention on spelling, punctuation, and structure.
2. Dictation of dialogue vocabulary words, phrases, and complete sentences to help with thought groups and recognition of grammar in context.
3. Dialogue segments to be completed in writing as dialogue is read aloud to aid in developing listening acuity and context use.
4. Written dialogue provided with words or lines omitted to elicit use of context and memory.
5. Student-originated dialogues cued by situations in English or by pictures and drawings related to the topics being presented.
6. Questions on the dialogue, both orally and in writing, begin the development of narrative.
7. Summary of the dialogue situation in paragraph form develops narrative, reading, and organizational capability.
8. The summary of the dialogue can be read to the group as students take notes in English or the target language, thus requiring the "fusion" of reading, speaking, listening, and writing. (Elkins, Kalivoda, and Morain, 1972)

While one does not expect a high level of creativity at the Novice level, the ability to use patterns and memorized materials does provide an opportunity for the imaginative student to create in the second language. Frequent misspellings can be expected, and a variety of sound/letter combination errors will probably occur. Regular dictation and emphasis on accuracy in written exercises can help the student prepare for the next course.

The following sample exercises illustrate the versatility of dialogue-based writing activities. In this case the original dialogue deals with tourists in a restaurant.

Step One: Pairs of students receive situation cards, produce "scripts" and present the resulting conversation to the class as a mini-drama.

Model: Student 1—You are in a restaurant.
Order soup, salad, chicken, and a bottle of wine. For dessert you want fruit and tea. You also want to pay with a credit card.
Student 2—You are the waiter/waitress.
Take the order, be very polite, and tell the customer the restaurant doesn't accept credit cards. You do, however, accept traveler's checks.
A possible result: (In the target language)
Waiter: May I help you?
Customer: Yes, please, I'd like soup, salad, chicken, and a bottle of wine. For dessert I'd like fruit and tea. Do you accept credit cards?
Waiter: Very well, I'm sorry we do not accept credit cards, but we do accept traveler's checks.
Customer: That's fine, thank you.

Step Two: The teacher asks a series of questions related to the situation presented. The student audience responds in the target language.

Step Three: Each student writes a short summary of what happened in the conversation, using the vocabulary and grammar structures they have heard and used orally. These summaries can be turned in and marked for errors.

It should be noted that the preceding series of exercises can easily be adapted to more advanced course levels as desired.

The Second Year

Writing in the second year can include a wide variety of activities, many of which are related to the solidification of basic accuracy in grammar and spelling. While the student still depends to a great extent on memorized material, the ability to write more creatively will be developed. The transition from direct to indirect discourse practiced in the first-year dialogue exercises begins the development of the structure necessary for

more creative and coherent paragraphs. This process continues during the second year.

Most second-year texts contain readings on current events and cultural topics along with a systematic grammar review. The readings can serve as the basis for a series of writing activities that also incorporate aural/oral skills. The following sequence of activities moves from those basically using a manipulative grammar drill to the practice of language in a more creative approach.

1. A series of sentence elements, such as subject, verb, and adverb are supplied, and the student writes a sentence practicing finite grammar points.
2. Sentences in scrambled word order are correctly rewritten to practice syntax.
3. A paragraph based on the reading selection can be altered according to person or tense to practice specific grammar points and develop organization.
4. A series of sentences in scrambled order is rewritten to form coherent, well-organized narration. A series of paragraphs can also be used in the same way.
5. Guided compositions are written according to a series of verbs or questions related to a single topic, such as the daily schedule, a favorite TV program, a trip, etc.
6. Compositions are written based on a thematic picture. Students may first discuss the pictures in class and then write a description or story.
7. Partial sentences are provided, and students complete them according to context and internalized grammar.
8. Cultural situations are described, and the students generate dialogues for in-class presentation. The student audience takes notes and writes summaries of what has been presented.
9. Several paragraphs are read by the student, who takes notes. A synopsis is written and read to the group. In this way the students practice reading for content and information relay, as well as aural/oral skill.

It is very useful to have one thematic picture or illustration as the basis for a sequence of activities using the "spiral" approach for grammar and vocabulary reinforcement. The following activities are based on a series of line drawings depicting the activities of a family's daily routine.

1. Oral description in the present tense reviews the necessary vocabulary and provides the basis for the introduction of past tenses and their uses.
2. The students discuss what happened to the family yesterday. (preterite/imperfect tense usage)
3. Assign a composition as homework. The compositions are turned in and errors are marked. Revision is done outside of class and final grades are given.
4. New vocabulary, for trips, etc., is introduced. Students discuss trips they have taken.
5. A composition on the trip is written and graded.
6. New verb forms such as commands are introduced. Possible orders regarding preparation for a trip, etc., are practiced.
7. The process continues with constant review and reinforcement.

In order to develop writing beyond the simple sentence, some special vocabulary and structural guidance must be provided. Complex sentences will require the introduction of conjunctions and relative pronouns, among other elements. The resulting complex sentences then need to be related to each other and the paragraphs that follow. The necessary vocabulary for enumeration (*primer, en primer lugar, entonces, en fin*, etc.); addition (*de nuevo, además*, etc.); sequencing (*así, como resultado*, etc.); explanation (*es decir, en otras palabras*, etc.); illustration (*por ejemplo*); contrast (*en cambio, sin embargo, al mismo tiempo*, etc.); may be introduced as needed through short vocabulary lists and sample sentences as necessary. A composition comparing and contrasting two pictures, situations or cultures, for example, would require a presentation or review of the 'more than,' 'less than,' 'as much as,' 'better than,'-type structures of the target language.

As the content of the student composition moves into territory not necessarily found in the text, some dictionary-use exercises need to be included with the assignments. The importance of vocabulary must be emphasized and finding the "proper" word can prove confusing if no experience has been provided (e.g., *Estoy espalda* results from attempting to express "I am back.")

The Third Year and Beyond

During the third and fourth year and beyond, high school and college courses will differ in that college courses tend to have more specific orientation: conversation, composition, grammar review, culture, and literature. While content may vary, the basic goals for writing development will be similar. Students will be learning to express and defend opinions,

produce cohesive narration and personal correspondence, and control less-structured grammar.

Depending on the course orientation, the following series of activities can be useful, once again with the textbook as the major stimulus.

1. Listen to a dialogue or taped narration or speech and take notes and write a summary. This is excellent preparation for classes where the lecture is given in the second language (culture, civilization, etc.).
2. Oral interviews are taped and the student transcribes and corrects the resulting script. This provides second-language practice in all skills.
3. Students develop an outline and then write a more extensive composition where they express and defend their opinion on specified topics (women's rights, political situations, etc.).
4. Reaction papers provide an introduction to literary criticism through personal reaction and opinion.
5. The pastiche can be used to help develop specific styles in prose. A simple short story, for example, supplies the basis for the students' effort.
6. A specific cultural situation, such as the proper type of gift to give, is used as the basis for "culture capsule" dialogues written and presented in class.
7. Book reports can be written and presented in class orally, thus practicing reading for meaning and synthesis of information.
8. A variety of letters can be written to provide "real" language use (personal letters); specialized vocabulary (business letters); and to practice expressing feelings (sympathy letters, "Ann Landers" letters, etc.).

Additional Activities

Although the activities suggested thus far have been grouped according to year of language study, it is quite possible to adapt most activities to any language level within reason. There are several additional activities that can be used throughout the study of the language, depending on the number of students involved and the complexity of the program set-up. Compositions can be written in groups at any level, with students helping each other formulate a coherent final product. The class can also contribute sentences to a single composition written on the board or the overhead projector by the teacher. This activity is especially useful when a new structure such as the concept of the preterite and imperfect is introduced for the first time. Pen pals, whether from the foreign country or from another language class, can

also be used to advantage. The one-to-one communication drives home the importance of accurate vocabulary and grammar. The teacher may serve as a consultant if severe problems arise, but in general the students should take the responsibility for effective communication. The journal has been used in English classes and other humanities courses to record personal growth, reactions and ideas. In a recent article Judith Melton (1983) discusses a variety of uses of the journal in language classes, especially in those courses where the writing component may not be so strong. The journal provides a record of the process of writing development. Content is the most important factor, with grammar correction done occasionally by the teacher, and often by the students as their ability increases. The journal allows for experimentation with the language, and the student has control. This process increases linguistic confidence and reinforces language in a non-threatening way. As with any acquired ability, practice does indeed help make perfect.

Grading

There are a variety of components that must be included in the grading of written work. Regardless of the level at which students are performing, they are applying previously learned material, as well as new structures. Content, accuracy, and function must all be evaluated. Students must be guided so that they learn to express their ideas using the language within their grasp. If instructions are carefully formulated, with possible errors mentioned in advance, the final product may well exceed expectations. The importance of constructive guidance cannot be ignored in writing development any more than it can in the areas of reading, listening, and speaking.

Grading written work has always posed difficulties. The teacher has had to worry about the time required for evaluation, and the student has had to deal with papers covered with red marks. Claire Gaudiani (1983) suggests writing from the very beginning in language study, with the bulk of the correction taking place through a variety of peer-editing and rewriting techniques. The teacher collects the assignments, circles the errors, and returns the papers to the students. The students, in groups of two or three discuss and edit their papers, which are then resubmitted for final grading. Students can often solve problems on another's paper that they do not see on their own. This active participation by the students improves learning and helps them recognize the process involved in writing. The teacher can make note of specific errors for subsequent class discussion and follow-up practice in the target language. In-class correction of written work can also be done using the chalkboard, overhead projections, dittoes of previously written student compositions (without correction and without the student name), and the student exchange of compositions for at-home editing. In

addition, variations of rewriting incorporated into a system of individual student-teacher conferences, peer editing, group corrections, and other activities that have been used in native-language classes over the years to improve writing skills can be implemented in the second-language classroom quite effectively.

Grading compositions objectively is very difficult. Although grammar is a major consideration, organization, style, and content must also be evaluated. Whatever grading formula is applied, the student must be encouraged to use a variety of vocabulary and structure. Experimentation within the language should be fostered and rewarded when possible. A useful approach for the student who has completed his composition and the teacher who grades it is a process of experiencing the content before correcting the grammar. The student edits the content before proofreading the grammatical aspects of the work. In this way "missing" ideas or incorrect vocabulary can be remedied before the final grammar check. When the teacher receives the work, it is read through without marking errors, and the grade for content and communication is given. Then the grammar correction and grading take place. Placing the major emphasis on content increases the students' desire to write purposefully, instead of writing only that which they know is "safe" (i.e., correct). This process neither condones nor encourages sloppy grammar; it does encourage language practice, which in turn causes improvement on all levels.

Regardless of the approach used to grade written work, feedback must be supplied as quickly as possible in order for the student to realize the complete benefit of the evaluative procedure. The longer the time between completion of the work and its return, the less impact there will be on the learning process. Students appreciate feedback and increase their efforts when they see that the teacher cares enough to evaluate the work carefully and completely. The importance of positive feedback on the composition must be emphasized. Excessive "constructive" criticism becomes a negative factor and actually discourages continual effort on the part of the student. A composition containing a myriad of grammar errors may express a unique point of view or tell a funny story. Appreciative comments on the teacher's part will encourage and motivate the student.

Summary and Conclusion

Development of second-language writing proficiency should begin during the first year of study. A series of activities based on the dialogues normally found in a first-year text provides the practice needed for the acquisition of the skill necessary for simple sentence communication based on high-frequency vocabulary and memorized material. During the second

year a variety of activities based on the readings normally included at this level continues the development of writing proficiency. The student will be able to write more coherent paragraphs based on personal experiences and other familiar topics. The students in the third-year courses and beyond will continue to express themselves on a variety of topics depending on the orientation of the specific course. At this level the skills needed to express opinions and defend ideas will be practiced. Throughout the language program, regardless of length, all four skills must be developed.

A well-integrated writing program is a vital component of any proficiency-oriented program. It is not necessary to wait until the third year to consider the possibility of creative writing. Systematic writing activities help reinforce the listening, speaking, and reading skills by providing the opportunity for review, correction, and assimilation of the second language. Early implementation of constructive written exercises emphasizing communication helps develop a strong base for future proficiency. Non-graded written work, student interaction and integrated four-skill development build confidence and allow the student freedom to communicate constructively. The sequential movement from manipulation of language patterns to creative, purposeful expression in the second language helps attain one of the principal goals of serious language study—the development of functional proficiency in writing.

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